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MOVING BEYOND PRECARIOUS LIVING IN NIGERIA

A Communiqué issued at the end of the Second Plenary Meeting of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) at the Divine Mercy Pastoral Centre, Agbamaya, Obada-Oko, Abeokuta, Ogun State, 11-20 September 2019.

1. PREAMBLE

We, the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria held our Second Plenary Meeting for the year at the Divine Mercy Pastoral Centre, Agbamaya, Obada-Oko, Abeokuta, Ogun State from 11-20 September 2019. Having prayerfully reflected on issues affecting the Church and the Nigerian State, we now issue this Communiqué.

2. IN COMMUNION WITH THE HOLY FATHER POPE FRANCIS

The Holy Father Pope Francis has come under attacks in recent times. Of more serious concern are the attacks coming from some higher levels of the Church in some parts of the world. As members of the Episcopal College, of which the Holy Father is the Head, we regard these attacks as the proverbial ill wind that blows no one any good, bearing in mind that there are other more legitimate and traditionally tested avenues of expressing our opinions to the Holy Father. To be able to lead the flock of Christ in the right direction in a world filled with many contradicting and confusing voices, we as a College must speak with one voice. We therefore recognise that "The Roman Pontiff, as the successor of Peter, is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the Bishops and of the whole company of the faithful" (Vat II, Lumen Gentium 23). We reaffirm our faith in and commitment to the Pontificate of the Holy Father Pope Francis. Consequently, we pledge our loyalty and availability to him in the exercise of his Petrine office, and we promise to continue to cooperate with him fully in the discharge of his divine mandate as the Pastor of the Universal Church (cf. Code of Canon Law, Cann. 331, 334).

3. STATE OF THE NATION

i) Continued Insecurity and the Need for Respect for Human Life

There are, unfortunately, still many instances of killings as a result of banditry, kidnapping, assassination, armed robbery, reckless use of force by security agencies and lynching. Lately, too, there is an upsurge in the cases of suicide, even among our youths. Furthermore, the clashes between herdsmen and communities, and the activities of Boko Haram insurgents have continued, in which many innocent people lose their lives. These make living in Nigeria very precarious. We recognise the efforts being made by the government to fight insecurity in the land. However, we emphasise that a lot more still needs to be done in this regard. We pray for the peaceful repose of the victims and sympathise with the bereaved families. We reiterate that without adequate security of lives and property, there can be no stability and enabling environment for meaningful development. We observe that the Federal Government, in which the power to control the major security agencies is vested, is overwhelmed. There is, therefore, need for proper decentralization of these agencies for effective results. We call on all citizens to be law abiding and vigilant, be one another's keeper, live by sound moral principles and, above all, obey the commandments of God. We urge governments at all levels to provide the enabling environment that would make it possible for both the government and the private sector to create job opportunities for our teeming youth population. This would certainly minimise the menace of insecurity in our land. We continue to urge the government and security agencies to do all they can to secure the immediate release of Leah Sharibu, the remaining Chibok girls and all the other persons still in captivity.

ii) Necessity for National Integration

We thank God for making it possible for our country to continue to exist as a sovereign nation. Yet, much effort is required from both government and citizens in order to have a nation in which everyone and every part, irrespective of differences of tribe or religion or political affiliation, will have a sense of belonging. We note with dismay that many months after the general elections, many parts of our nation are still in disarray. The country is badly divided. This is evident in appointments to positions of national importance, sharing of resources, and distribution of social amenities. We urge especially the Federal Government, to ensure that it does not allow ethnic or religious hegemony to prevail in our multi-religious and secular state. No one religion should be favoured over another. There should be fairness, justice and neutrality in relation to all religions and ethnic groups, for where there is no justice, there can be no peace, unity and development. We therefore enjoin all Nigerians to see themselves as one united people and work for justice in order to ensure a peaceful and united nation.

iii) Religion, Politics and Life

We are grateful to God that in these trying times, many Nigerians remain manifestly religious. Our practice of religion, however, seems to have little effect on our moral, socio-economic and political lives. While praying for solutions to our problems, we must endeavour to be just in our dealings with others, work hard in fulfilling our duties, and collaborate with others in the social transformation of our country. We observe that our democracy is derailing from what it should be. The qualities of accountability, transparency, independence of the judiciary, respect for fundamental rights, observance of the rule of law, and fair and credible electoral process, to mention only these, are still lacking. We therefore urge all politicians, businessmen, religious leaders, public servants and indeed all citizens to live out the values of their faith for the common good. To all of us we address the challenge of our Lord Jesus Christ: "You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world" (Mt. 5: 13-14).

4. XENOPHOBIC ATTACKS IN SOUTH AFRICA

We denounce the horrendous xenophobic attacks in South Africa in which many non-nationals, including Nigerians, lost their lives and/or have their property looted and/or forced to flee the country for their dear lives. We condemn the unfortunate reprisals on perceived South African investments in some part of Nigeria, as two wrongs do not make a right! We pray for the peaceful repose of those who lost their lives and sympathise with those who have suffered bereavement, injuries and heavy losses. We commend the South African Catholic Bishops' Conference (SACBC) for being prophetic in their condemnation of the attacks and urging the government to take decisive steps to end them. We join our brother Bishops in vehemently condemning the attacks and with them draw the attention of all nations to Deuteronomy 10:18: "He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing." At the same time, we note that South Africa and Nigeria have come a long way in fraternal and diplomatic relations. We advise Nigerians living at home and abroad to be good and law abiding.

5. THE SANCTITY OF MARRIAGE AND THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FAMILY

Marriage, the sacred and inviolable union between one man and one woman, is under pressure throughout the world. In our country, this pressure has been increased by the economic and social crises that have lasted for several years. As a result, many a family is no longer stable enough to fulfill the traditional roles of the family in the Church and in the society. We therefore reiterate that the family, as the cradle of life and development, needs to be helped to rediscover as well as to cherish its divine mandate as the first school of virtues and values. Parents are called upon to, by their words and examples, uphold the ideals of decency, discipline, honesty and marital fidelity. The pursuit of wealth and 'success' must be guided by those values if families are to bequeath to the wider society responsible young people, who cherish hard work and merit, who respect elders, value the sacredness of life, the sanctity of the sacrament of marriage and are willing to honestly contribute to the building of the nation and the growth of the Church. Parents are also enjoined to keep vigilance over their children and wards, in order to provide moral guidance and protection from unhealthy influences, sexual deviance and exploitation. In spite of present economic challenges, we urge the members of families never to throw away the important African and Christian values of respect and care for the elderly.

6. A CALL ON THE PRIESTS AND RELIGIOUS

In union with the Holy Father Pope Francis, we thank and encourage those priests and religious who continue to put themselves at risk in serving the people of God and giving themselves up unreservedly, never to give up. However, we also insist that the times call for holiness of life and more sacrifice on the part of all priests and religious if we are to be true to our vocations. All priests and religious must exercise discretion and be committed to a life of simplicity that is consistent with the life of the Master, who had nowhere to lay his head (cf. Lk 9:57-58). An ostentatious and materialistic life of luxury draws unnecessary attention and portends counterwitnessing.

We also enjoin all priests and religious to have a healthy relationship with young people and do more to inculcate the faith in them. Altar servers, members of the Association of the Holy Childhood, teenagers, members of Catholic Youth Organization of Nigeria (CYON), Young Catholic Students (YCS), Nigeria Federation of Catholic Students (NFCS) and others, need faith mentoring to ensure a fruitful future for the Church. All forms of abuse of minors and vulnerable adults are to be abhorred, since they are a betrayal not only of the confidence our people repose in us but also of our vocations and ministry as priests and religious.

7. EVENTS IN THE CHURCH

This year marks the centenary celebration of the Apostolic Letter of Pope Benedict XV, *Maximum Illud*, on the Church's missionary role, issued on 30 November 1919. To mark the celebration, Pope Francis has drawn the attention of the entire Church to the Extraordinary Mission Month of October 2019. This month serves as a momentous opportunity to reflect on the meaning of the missionary mandate of Christ, to assess the effectiveness of our response to this mandate, to reignite our zeal for the mission, and provide prayerful support for missionary efforts all over the Catholic world.

The International Young Catholic Students (IYCS) held their World Council meeting in Abuja, Nigeria, from 30 August to 10 September 2019 with the theme: "Taking Action for Peace, Here and Now." The Golden Jubilee of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) was celebrated in Kampala, Uganda, 19-29 July 2019. The Conferences of Africa and Madagascar were represented. The Jubilee celebration provided a significant opportunity for the Church in Africa to evaluate her evangelizing strategy and effectiveness of her becoming Family of God in the true and rich sense. The third Plenary Assembly of the Regional Episcopal Conference of West Africa (RECOWA) was held in Ouagadougou 13-20 May 2019. Thirty-four Nigerian Bishops were in attendance. The Assembly called on the governments and civil authorities in the West Africa region to pay more attention and commit more resources to the development of the youths. The next Plenary Assembly comes up in the year 2022 and will be hosted by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN). We take this opportunity to congratulate Most Rev. Ignatius Ayau Kaigama, the Co-adjutor Archbishop of Abuja and the Apostolic Administrator of Jos Archdiocese, on his re-election as the President of RECOWA.

We congratulate the Ecclesiastical Provinces of Abuja, Benin City, Calabar, Ibadan, Jos and Owerri for celebrating the 25th Anniversary of their erection this year. May the Church of Christ continue to flourish in our land. Amen. We thank God for the increase in the number of Bishops in Nigeria. Most Rev. Francis Obafemi Adesina, the Bishop of Ijebu Ode Diocese, was ordained on 25 April 2019. Most Rev. Patrick Eluke, the Auxiliary Bishop of Port Harcourt Diocese, was also ordained on 9 May 2019. We wish Most Rev. Albert Fasina, the Bishop Emeritus of Ijebu Ode Diocese, a happy retirement and thank him for his services. We thank God for Most Rev. Paul Olawore who on 12 July 2019 officially assumed office as the substantive Bishop of Ilorin Diocese. We rejoice with and thank Most Rev. Ayo Maria Atoyebi, OP, the Bishop Emeritus of the same Diocese for his stewardship. We regret the death of Most Rev. Kevin Joseph Aje, the Bishop Emeritus of Sokoto Diocese, who died on 27 May 2019 and has since been buried. We condole with the Bishop, Priests and the Laity of Sokoto Diocese and pray God to grant his servant eternal rest.

We equally congratulate the Dioceses of Maiduguri and Ijebu Ode on their epoch-making achievements. The Diocese of Maiduguri dedicated her St. Patrick's Cathedral on 10 July 2019. Ijebu Ode Diocese celebrated the Golden Jubilee of her canonical erection as a Diocese on 18 July 2019.

8. CONCLUSION: A CALL FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE

The Nigerian State is much endowed with natural, human and spiritual resources. Sadly, political authorities have not been completely diligent in relating to these resources neither have they been fair and equitable in distributing them. Justice requires them to give everyone their due, from sharing of resources to caring for the human person. Where there is no fair sharing of wealth and opportunities, there is bound to be crisis. It is only when we have justice that we can have true peace and sustainable development. We enjoin all Christians and people of good will to preach daily this message of justice and peace, and to live it out coherently. May the Blessed Virgin Mary our Mother, the Queen of Peace and Patroness of Nigeria intercede for us.

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